

**WHAT POLICY
ANALYSTS DO:
THREE RESEARCH
STYLES**

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This Insight gives the characteristics of three styles of research conducted by university faculty who consider themselves policy analysts. The three styles studied are policy analysis, policy research, and applied social science research.

Policy Analysis *Example:* Staff memo on whether the National Advisory Commission on Social Security should recommend that federal liquor and tobacco taxes be dedicated to the Medicare trust fund.

Problem definition: Consider a narrowly defined problem faced by a specific decision-maker in a specific position at a specific time.

Audience: Decision-maker client.

Time period during which the work will be relevant: Days or weeks.

Scope of work: Narrow focus on those aspects of the problem that are of greatest concern to the client, synthesizing readily available data and relevant research findings.

Quantitative methods: Addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division.

Comments: This activity is closest to the work that students in public policy programs are likely to do after graduation. Thus, this activity is helpful in teaching, but memos are not publishable.

Policy Research *Example:* Monograph on the deregulation of natural gas prices.

Problem definition: Conduct broad assessment of a policy problem or policy option.

Audience: Present and future policymakers, policy analysts, academics, the public.

Time period during which the work will be relevant: A few years.

Scope of work: Comprehensive review of many findings and considerations within a normative framework provided by economics and political theory.

Quantitative methods: Decision analysis, cost-benefit analysis, systems analysis.

Comments: The research agenda is defined by the problem rather than by the needs and interests of an academic discipline.

**Applied Social
Science Research** *Example:* Technical article reporting statistical analysis of the effect of changes in the minimum legal drinking age on the auto fatality rate.

Problem definition: Develop empirical assessment of the actual or projected impact of a policy intervention on a narrowly defined set of outcomes.

Audience: Academics, policy analysts.

Time period during which the work will be relevant: A few years.

Scope of work: Narrow focus on a particular causal mechanism or process.

Quantitative methods: Regression analysis, hypothesis testing, mathematical modeling.

Comments: The primary concern is to obtain an answer that is reasonable given available information, rather than to use the most sophisticated available techniques or to confirm disciplinary prejudice.

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